



King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.1080/03068374.2016.1267435](https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2016.1267435)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Brown, K. (2017). The powers of Xi Jinping. *Asian Affairs*, 48(1), 17-26.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2016.1267435>

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

The Powers of Xi Jinping

Kerry Brown, King's College and Chatham House

The nature and extent of the powers of the Chinese president, and the Party Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party has become one of the most discussed issues in the last four years since his ascension at the end of 2012. Portrayed in his first year in office on the front of the Economist as a modern day Qianlong, one of the great emperors from the high point of China's imperial past, he has been called by not less a peer than President Obama as 'the most powerful leader modern China has seen since Mao Zedong.' Others have named him 'the Chairman of everything' for his proclivity in setting up impressive sounding leading groups from whence major policies are announced. As the anti-corruption struggle he has spearheaded has gone on, outlasting every other similar move in modern Chinese history, some have even granted him the ultimate accolade – a figure who is as, if not more, powerful than the founding father of the regime, Mao Zedong.

For someone in power in a time of peace who has so far only had four years of real top-level leadership experience, it is an astonishing thing to hear Xi talked of this way. Mao Zedong was present when the Communist Party of China held its first congress in July 1921, attended by only 13 people. He was a local leader in its years of harshest banishment and victimization, surviving the purge where over 5000 of his tiny struggling party were slaughtered in 1927. He manipulated his dominant position over an era in which China was exposed to one of the most terrible wars in human history, against the Japanese – one which saw 20 million of his compatriots slaughtered. From the ashes of this experience, he guided the Party to victory in the Civil War against the Nationalists, emerging victorious and establishing the People's Republic in 1949.

How can Xi's record and the legitimacy that flows from it be compared to this sort of story? Comparing the two is like trying to find parity between two things in different orders – electric current, for instance, in a modern machine, and water in a medieval mill. For sure, they are both producing mechanical power. And obviously, the former is much stronger than the latter. But in view of the wholly different contexts in which these forms of energy operated, is it really that meaningful to say one is clearly stronger than the other. The very strongest claim one might make is that they are part of a continuum of the same thing – and as I will argue, the only meaningful commonality is the very obvious thing that links them – the currency they have in common despite the vast difference in the ages in which they operated – and that is the organization they lead – the Communist Party of China.

Thinking about Xi without considering this organization – the Party – is nonsensical. He is there because he is its servant. He has worked within it all his life since his late teens. It was an organization he spent his childhood interacting with, through the role his father had as a high level government official in the Propaganda Department. It was the organization that placed his father under house arrest for almost two decades, and which exiled him to the rural part of China for a decade from 1968. Xi himself applied to join the Party ten times before he was finally successful. But from the day in which he became a member in 1973 he has been working within, through, and under the Party. This would not be true of

Mao, who in many ways was always threatening to be larger than this organisation he did so much to mould and bring to power.

Instead of asking who is Xi, what does he stand for, what does he believe in, it is best to take a step back and ask what is the Party he belongs to, what does it stand for, what does it believe in? The Communist Party operates in China like a corporate body, a person. It has an identity, a culture, a discourse, a world within a world. It has proved a hard entity to conceptualise. What precisely is it?

In the summer of 2014, in Copenhagen, I took part in a small seminar with one of the current members of the Standing Committee of the Party – the organization that stands at the summit of party management, with seven members. Liu Yunshan is unique in the current elite leadership. Unlike his six other colleagues he has never occupied senior leadership positions at provincial level. His whole career has been in the thought management and propaganda apparatus. In that sense he is the defender of the faith in contemporary China – someone who enforces the messages sent to the Party's members through its media. For him, that June day, the question he had was a simple one. What did we, as so-called external specialists, think the Party was? Some suggested it was fragmented authoritarian. This produced bewilderment on his part. 'We are neither fragmented nor authoritarian' he barked. We tried again. 'Consultative Leninist,' someone else said. Others came up in increasingly desperation with models used in western discourse on the Party. None passed muster.

Mr Liu enlightened us all that day. The Party, he said, is a repository of the hopes and aspirations of the Chinese people. It is the expression of the cultural, social and political values of Chinese society, a force with a historic mission to deliver China to a moment of historic rectification, when the century of humiliation from the first opium war after 1839 would be rectified and China return to its place at the centre of world affairs. It is, he said emphatically, and with some disdain, not like a political party in the west. Our language was misleading. It was not really a party at all, with their limitations and carefully delineated locations on the political spectrum. The Party was able to embrace the left and the right, the high and the low. It was, although he did not say as much, almost like a world within a world.

Early in the history of the Party in China, before it even came to power, western analysts did refer to it as like a state within a state. That was largely because it was a subterfuge, victimized entity back then, and had to create its own support structures, and protective walls. In 1927 it acquired an armed wing. In the 1930s under Mao its ideology differentiated itself increasingly from that of the bigger brother, the Party in the Soviet Union. For them, revolution from the urban proletariat made sense. But in China, only 2 per cent of the 1937 population resided in cities and worked in factories. The Chinese form of Marxism became agrarian. And because of this it acquired a sui generis nature. A rule, in many ways, to itself.

The ways in which the Communist Party found itself victor in a Civil War and in charge of a government and a country from 1949 caused immense dislocations within it. From a revolutionary entity, it had to become a governing one. But under Mao it never quite lost the zealous desire for social mobilization and change. Mao sponsored 19 mass movements, culminating in the Cultural Revolution launched half a century ago this year, and labeled, by the great Chinese writer Ba Jin as 'a spiritual holocaust.' Maoist

politics was to take immense toll on society. The Party remarkably became the victim of perhaps its key founder, with its elite leadership decimated. The state within a state had become dominant over a vast society. Its history became the modern history of the country it was in charge of. But this separation and exclusion has never quite left the organization.

What is the Communist Party in the 21st century? Finding the right model for it has proved challenging. Unlike the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, it has – so far – not been swept away by economic and social change within the country it exercises a monopoly on organized political power over. Even so, it has yet to reach the 74 year mark that the USSR's leading party did before it succumbed, in 1991. That point, for the People's Republic, comes in 2024. After that point, if it survives, it will be a record breaker. But the Communist Party has always been different to that of Russia. This exceptionalism percolates into other areas of the Chinese psyche – from culture, to history.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the Party in the era after 1978, when the Maoist parameters of class struggle and Utopian social goals were eschewed for embracing the free market, foreign capital and entrepreneurialism is the ways in which it has become a stupendous money making machine. An entity preaching the virtues of dictatorship of the proletariat, the mass line, the dominance of socialism, had, by the mid 2000s, become perhaps the most phenomenal wealth creation organization the world has ever seen. Chinese GDP rose from 300 USD per capita in 1980 to 7000 by 2016. The Chinese economy posted double digit growth rates throughout the two decades from 1978 up to 2001. But this was only the introit to an era after entry to the World Trade Organisation when thing went truly ballistic. Far from being overwhelmed by foreign competition and the rigours of the global marketplace, once China joined in November 2001 it ushered in an era of unparalleled productivity. The Chinese economy quadrupled in size over the next two decade – an even more extraordinary achievement when one remembers that in 2008 the developed world experienced its worst contraction since the Great Depression over 70 years before.

The impact of this on Chinese society, culture, and attitudes was immense. It seemed to those whose visits to China over this era were separated by even a few months that whole cities were either rebuilt, or simply created from scratch. Visits to old haunts were often accompanied by confusion and disorientating feelings. At one point, Shanghai had more cranes than the rest of the world put together, putting up 2000 towerblocks over 20 stories high. In the era under Party Secretary Hu Jintao China became a place of big statistics and eye watering dynamism. But it also became a place where the Party mission was muted by the phenomenal temptations offered not by serving the people and Marxism Leninism, but material enrichment. The Party's ethical basis had never been that deeply thought out. It had always appealed to a hybrid of nationalism, fear and the utilitarianism of ends justifying means. But under Hu, officials experienced daily schizophrenia, where their powers over immense projects with multi billion dollar budgets cut against their modest wages and their superficial allegiance to creating a brave new world of equality and equity. From the early 1980s when China's Gini co-efficient was relatively low, it exploded by the late noughties to levels usually associated with Latin America.

One writer called this era 'the Fat Years.' A time of incredible decadence, when newly emerged billionaires literally had so much money they could paper their walls with it. One Chinese business man

even took to travelling abroad and chucking wads of dollars out of his car to the 'poor oppressed of the developed west.' China's 'peaceful rise' as it was referred to from 2005 was also the time of the Party's being swamped in material excess. Corruption became endemic. 'When Chinese officials are not corrupt, 'one farmer acidly commented at the time, 'everyone else regards them with suspicion, and wonders what is wrong with them.' Disdain for the Maoist era became de rigeur. 'It is true we were all equal back then,' another commented, 'we had an equal share of nothing.' Deng Xiaoping, already departed a decade before, the architect of the policies that had led to this era of ambition had said to get rich is glorious. Under Hu, the glorious era reached its apogee, reflected in the cynical comment of one of the winners of a Chinese reality TV show that 'I would rather be weeping in a BMW than laughing on a bike.'

There was a cost to this – the collapse of trust and faith in the Party itself. Networks within the Partywide universe appeared – elite families, different factional groups, regional clusterings. All of them seemed to be on the take. Reports in the Western press associated the family of the Premier Wen Jiabao at the time with billion dollar amounts being off loaded from state enterprises into the hands of private groups, where they vanished. Capital flow out of the country shot up. Sectors like telecoms, energy, housing and even entertainment became like fiefdoms. Mao Zedong had complained of 'mountain-hold' mentality – shantouzhuyi. The unified, unifying Party looked more like a coalition of business networks, wholly jettisoning its founding mission, to stick up for the great mass of the people.

In this context, the Xi phenomenon has an historic logic. With double digit growth, in the end few weren't able to at least get some benefits from the exploding economy. But by 2012, growth was starting to dry up. The new Premier Li Keqiang urged in 2013 that the country had to rebalance its model – seek growth within, through rising services and consumption, wean itself off export orientated, manufacturing for foreign markets, with their fickle rates of demand, but start to service the 'spaces of growth' within the country – creating an indigenous finance sector, creating goods for the domestic market, and accelerating urbanization. Xi's new political order needed to do something urgently about equity and efficiency – the gross imbalances between the rich and the poor, and the ways in which the Party was seen as just another vested interest on the take, had to be addressed. In essence, the Party had to start sounding, and acting, like it had a belief system and a moral order – even if it was creating this as much from scratch as the cities that were being thrown up across the country which were appearing from nowhere.

This was not Xi Jinping's decision. It was the decision of a group of leaders of which Xi was one member. But for a significant, and evidently influential cohort, of elites over the period 2011 to 2012 when the so called fifth generation leadership transition was happening, the evidence of a Party whose moral compass was badly damaged mounted. The business associate of the wife of one member of the politburo, a British man, ended up murdered in late 2011. Only three months later the son of another died in a car crash in Beijing. He was naked, with two other semi naked Tibetan women in the car, and, most damaging of all, the car he was in was a Ferrari worth tens of thousands of pounds. Accusations of politicians being linked to vast overseas funds appeared in the foreign and, sometimes, domestic press. With growth rates falling, the Party was faced with a perfect storm – its fundamental pillar of legitimacy

based on at least materially enriching the majority of the people likely to be eroded in the years ahead. Unsurprisingly, austerity politics was on the cards.

This makes the value of the 'Xi package' to the Party in this era of potential crisis very clear. Xi was not a member of the super elite. In some senses he is B grader – a member of a secondary level family, not one of the grand clans. More importantly, he had maintained, even in the fat years, an almost primitive belief in the moral mission of the Party, and in the need for it to focus solely on politics, and keep away from big ticket money making. In this context, the Party found him – rather than he found the Party. It needed someone with almost a naïve, visceral faith in its function, its purpose and its so called historic mission. It did not want someone with a sophisticated, complex view of its role in the world. It wanted a period of back to basics, led by someone who acted and spoke like they believed that.

In Xi's words over the last three decades as a provincial and national leader, the Party has figured in ways which are at odds perhaps with most outside understanding of it. In 1991, when a mid ranking official in Fujian province, south east China, he had stated to the official Xinhua news agency that people should go into politics to serve, not to make money – precisely the opposite of what in fact seemed to be happening at the time. Even as a central leader in the period after 2007, he had defended the idea of the Party having a unified historic narrative. There was no such things as two periods – one prior to 1978 in the era of Mao, and the other after when Deng created Reform and Opening Up. Instead, Xi bridged the two by saying that the earlier period was the inevitable basis for the latter one. The two were integral parts of one story.

In that story, the Communist Party figured firstly as a kind of epistemic community – a body which, through experiment, challenge, strife, and sometimes colossal failure – had accrued immense knowledge, about development, about how to lift people from poverty, about how to maintain unity, something which the benighted Soviet Union Party had failed to do. Added to this was a sense that the Party occupied a privileged place in society, where its role was to strategise, control the overall story of the development of the country, articulate grand visions and final outcomes, while all other bodies and institutions, from the government, to the army, to those in permitted civil society, hovered around it, following in the story that it was telling.

More remarkably, for a country which many proclaimed was unideological, or ideological only in the sense that it had embraced the most red blooded form of capitalism, Xi consistently urged a return to its ideological roots. Faith in Marxism Leninism mattered. It wasn't a game. People had to be indoctrinated. The 88 million members of the Party, with their 2000 plus Party schools across the country, had to be inculcated with a new ideological and moral mission. There indoctrination mattered. This was clearly not about the content or inner conviction of the ideology. Asking most Party officials whether they believed in the various doctrines of Socialism with Chinese characteristics elicited the same befuddled look that one gets when quizzing the average Catholic about papal infallibility, or an Anglican about refined elements of the mystery of the Holy Trinity. For them, the key thing was that the Party was, in the end, a faith community. And ideological unity and discipline had a functional value. We believe in these things, Xi simply explained at one point, because they have worked. So we have to carry on believing in them. As Deng said in an earlier era, Marxism had a utility in China, it created simplifying adherence and

fidelity where there might, if relaxation happened, be the dreaded instability and chaos. It was the fact that people within the Party, on the surface at least, believed a closed set of ideas in common, not what they believed, that mattered.

The Party under Xi is finally the network of networks – the only entity that lifts China outside the highly tribal, almost nodal social structure that figures like the father of modern Chinese sociology, the great Fei Xiaotong, noted. For him, writing in 1947, Chinese society was an overwhelmingly agrarian one, one where everyone knew everyone else, where contracts and laws were unnecessary because you only ever dealt with people with physical propinquity to you. It was, using Fei's elegant phrase, a society of elastic bonds, with the individual, selfish, all-controlling, sitting at the centre. Even in the second decade of the 21st century, in a survey in 2014, people were asked which they trusted strongly – neighbours, friends, class mates. All of these only received 20 per cent ratings. Over 80 per cent trusted family strongly. There is even a name for this feeling of family connectedness in Chinese – renqing. Chinese society remains one where family is the emperor.

For the Party, however, with its modernization commitment, this has always been a problem. Throughout its history, it has tried to erode the primacy of the family. In the Cultural Revolution, families were deliberately set against themselves. In successive campaigns through the Deng, Jiang and Hu era, family links have been attacked, quizzed, and interrogated. And yet, it was the strength of super elite family networks in the Hu era which were linked to immense larceny and control of specific state enterprises that was causing the most problems – the Wens, Lis, Zhus and Jiangs. Even Mao Zedong's granddaughter figured on a list of super rich, and his great great grandson appeared as a member of the central government consultative body.

The Communist Party figuring as a meritocracy, waging war against members who have a sense of entitlement because of family connections, is, strangely enough, one area of commonality before and after the year zero of 1978. But as Mao himself was often to complain, Chinese society has proved hard to reform, even after the most searing experience of revolution and the dislocation it causes. The simple fact is that even the current anti-corruption onslaught on family and other clans to create a society 'ruled by law, not by men' has proved very challenging.

To us, in the 21st century, the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping's Communist Party of China, matters because it is the great exception. Modernisation theory implies that eventually, after a certain level of economic growth, countries will evolve into multi party systems. That, at least, is what happened in South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, other Asian tigers which started from similar levels of poverty and used similar methods to those of China to generate wealth. But for the CPC seems to stand today ready to buck this trend, focused under Xi on the era up to the centennial of the Party's establishment in 2021 when it will preside over a middle income country, but one still promulgating the mass line, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and what Xi himself called the 'Four Comprehensives.' The simple fact is that the longer the Party's grand experiment goes on, the more it threatens to disrupt so many of the assumptions on political science theory. Proving that one can have high wealth levels, high education levels, and a high standard of development and yet maintaining the one party structure offends the universalizing predisposition of most theorists who assume that at some point, something has to

give, and pluralism, public choice, some kind of participation in decision making has to enter the equation.

Looking solely at Xi as a political figure, wondering at his power and its reach, means being seduced by the symptoms of a system, rather than truly understanding their underlying causes. Xi has only ever spoken in a context where he is within, working for, a party of the Party, its servant if you like. And without an understanding of that institutional context, his powers make no sense.

And there is a problem in all of this. Chinese politics now looks rough and brutal. Those on Xi's side who state loyalty and fidelity are fine. The slightest heresy and one enters what the Buddhists called the 18 circles of hell. Phones are cut off. Social connections die. Your family are no longer protected. In the most networked society on earth, hell is when the networks collapse around you and you are on your own. Plenty of the disloyal in China are getting that treatment now. Xi himself has proved a very political figure. GDP growth and economic performance are no longer the pure objectives for action. It is about grander things – delivery finally of the great dream of a nation which is powerful, strong, and has its status restored to it after the nightmare of modernity from 1840 onwards. For the first time, China has the upper hand. Its tomorrow is looking brighter than those of the West. To accompany this vision, Xi's language differs from the technocratic, dry, staccato rattling of statistics and economic 'truths' beloved of his predecessors. He speaks of visions, ambitions, goals, with more mention of classical Chinese poets than Mao or Marx. One of the most striking images he has deployed over the last two years is that of the two centennial goals – that of 2021 when the Party celebrates its hundredth anniversary in existence by delivering a middle income country in China, and one in 2049, when the People's Republic celebrates its great moment of one hundred years of power by delivering Democracy with Chinese characteristics.

That's the promise. And the future has always been the space for imaginations, visions, hopes in the hard years since 1949 when there was, often, so much present suffering. Tomorrow as always the cure for the harsh present day, even if it wasn't going to arrive for a long time. Mao talked of ten thousand years, betraying his poetic temperament. Deng, more prosaically, promised good times in a century. For Jiang and Hu, it was decades away. But for Xi, the good times being promised are imminent – just a few years down the line. 2021 is five years hence. What will the moment which he has been so avidly been promising look like when it arrives – how will it feel for Chinese people? Will it have been worth the hard, long, often bitter journey to get there?

We don't know in the end what Chinese people will feel when they finally reach that moment, any more than Xi does. For him, of course, the best thing would be to have a grateful public who finally learn, as Orwell said, that they love the Party, and they cannot live without it. But there is another sobering final place – a country, for whom when the future that was always dangled before them finally arrives realise that they no longer need the CPC, and that their pathways into deeper modernity can be undertaken without it. This was always the great paradox of the Communist system – that it promised a Utopian future where it itself would one day need to disappear from view. The greatest paradox of contemporary China and of the powers of Xi Jinping is that if he is truly powerful, if he can really achieve what he has promised through the Party – then he is the person who will see this remarkable social force finally fade from view.